

CHAPTER TWO: THE LOW COUNTRY COASTAL COTTAGE AND SNEE FARM, 1828 – 1941

During the first third of the nineteenth century the Coastal Cottage became the favored house type among the elite low country planters of South Carolina. Although a few showplace plantation houses like Fenwick Hall, Drayton Hall, and Middleton Place were constructed in South Carolina in the eighteenth century, social life for the planters centered around their townhouses in Charleston. Working plantations were more likely to have smaller, comfortable houses suitable for occasional residence by the owners. The side-gabled Coastal Cottage was admirably adapted to this sort of use, and the extant house at Snee Farm is a good example of this house type. Constructed circa 1828, the one-and-one-half-story Snee Farm main house is rectangular in plan with a side-gable roof, full-width front porch, and a brick pier foundation. The interior features elaborate molding, paneling, and other decorative details.¹

Coastal Cottages were constructed throughout the South Carolina low country, from Port Royal Sound to the Pee Dee River. Retreat, built circa 1754 in Beaufort County, is among the earliest known examples.² Master builders and joiners, who worked from pattern books, along with slave craftsmen and laborers, constructed most Coastal Cottages during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Although planters may have participated in design decisions, few professionally trained architects have been connected with these houses.³

Architectural elements common to Coastal Cottages include the rectangular plan, side-gable roof, full-width front porch, brick pier foundation, and Georgian plan. Facades generally have three or five bays with a central entrance. Additionally, planters' houses were often clad in weather boards and included interior chimneys placed along the ridge line.⁴

Floor plans for Coastal Cottages were based on the Georgian plan, which appeared in America in the early eighteenth century. The typical Coastal Cottage consisted of four heated rooms and a central passage. Coastal Cottages, such as the Perry-Smoak House constructed in

Colleton County circa 1814, featured two central entrances that open directly on the parlor and dining room, eliminating the central passage.⁵ The Grove, built in Charleston County circa 1828, fuses a traditional Georgian plan with two elliptical-shaped front rooms.⁶ Unusual room shapes, particularly shapes based on the circle or ellipse, were fashionable during the Federal period, from about 1789 to about 1830. The second floor of most Coastal Cottages, typically a half-story, contained bedrooms.



Figure 26, Drayton Hall

Decorative details reflect the neoclassical style of design that was popular at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Elliptical fanlights or transoms and sidelights often framed entrances. Interiors were finished with elaborate woodwork such as keyed arches dividing the entrance hall and stair hall. Paneled wainscoting and finely molded window and door surrounds were accented with crown and cornice moldings and plaster medallions.

Fireplaces were the focal points of the public rooms and feature some of the most costly ornamentation associated with Coastal Cottages.⁷ Dean Hall, built in Berkeley County in 1827, features complex cornice moldings, ceiling medallions, and a stone mantelpiece with slender columns and a decorative panel frieze.⁸

Planters resided at their plantation houses during the spring and fall, avoiding the summer fever season. The winter social season was usually spent in Charleston, where the low country elite maintained their principal residences. These larger and more sumptuously appointed homes served as backdrops for much of the season's entertaining.⁹ The fashionably decorated public rooms common to Coastal Cottages, however, suggest that these houses were also designed to receive guests and formally entertain. The proximity of Snee Farm to Charleston assured that the plantation was used for entertaining. The elegant detailing in the house suggests it was often used for guests. Additionally, the evidence of formal gardens adjacent to the house further indicates the use of the house for pleasure and entertaining.

The planter's house was one component of a large agricultural complex that typically featured scores of structures. Outbuildings such as kitchens, smokehouses, dairies, privies, and slave dwellings were integral to the plantation landscape. Many specialized structures were devoted entirely to the cultivation of rice, indigo, and later, cotton.¹⁰



Figure 27, Snee Farm Main House

HISTORIC RESOURCES OF SNEE FARM

William Mathews, a low country planter, built the main house at Snee Farm circa 1828.¹¹ Mathews's ventures were extremely successful, and his holdings included 352 slaves. By 1848, he owned five plantations, various tracts of land, and maintained a principal residence in Charleston.¹² The Snee Farm main house is the only extant resource that dates to the Mathews period of ownership, which began in 1828 and ended when Mathews left the property to his daughter in 1848.

The previous owner of Snee Farm, Francis G. Deliesseline, purchased the property from the trustees of Charles Pinckney in 1817 and had the estate surveyed the following year. The plat indicates rice fields and ditches, farm roads, and a cruciform-shaped formal garden located to the north of the Pinckney-era main house.¹³ Many of these features are present in an 1841 Mathews survey. A house located at the north end of the property is joined with a public road to the south, presently U.S. Route 17, by a long drive running north and south. A row of slave dwellings is organized along an avenue perpendicular to the main drive. Several other structures and possibly a garden are located in the vicinity of the main house.¹⁴ The main house, however, is the only nineteenth-century structure that remains at the site.



Figure 28, Snee Farm Main House

Like many Coastal Cottages in the region, the main house at Snee Farm is a one-and-one-half-story, five-bay structure with a Georgian plan.¹⁵ The side-gable roof features two interior chimneys along the ridgeline and an engaged full-width porch across the south facade.¹⁶ The house is raised on brick piers and constructed with heavy timbers. It is clad with beveled wood siding.

The floor plan of the main block features four rooms off a center stair hall. The stair is set along the east wall at the north end of the hall. The front parlors (the southeast and southwest rooms) have doorways that open onto the hall opposite each other and the fireplaces are in the center of the north wall. The smaller, rear northeast and northwest rooms also open onto the hall and are heated with fireplaces. The second-floor plan follows the layout of the first floor with a center hall illuminated by dormers. Each of the four rooms are lit by a dormer and a gable-end window. Only the southeast and southwest rooms feature fireplaces. The northwest room has been converted to a bathroom.

First-story windows of the main block are nine-over-nine double-hung sashes with molded surrounds and wood shutters. The three gabled roof dormers on the north and south elevations feature six-over-six double-hung sashes with plain surrounds and molded pediments.

The main entrance consists of a six-panel wood door, a four-light transom, and a molded surround. The corresponding door on the north side is similar but narrower, with a three-light transom.

Interior woodwork dates to the construction of the house and remains largely intact. Each room includes unpainted wainscoting. In addition, first-floor rooms are finished with chair rails and cornice moldings. A keyed arch bisects the stair hall and features molded pilasters and a reeded underside. The mantelpieces in the southeast and southwest parlors are the most elaborate of the six mantelpieces in the main block. These appear to be hand-carved and feature pilasters, center panel friezes, and end blocks.

In the hands of a succession of owners, the main house at Snee Farm remained largely unchanged for nearly one hundred years. In 1936, Thomas Ewing purchased the property and enlarged the house. The additions are in the form of gable-front dependencies joined to a porch on the north side of the house by small hyphens. The northwest wing contained the kitchen, pantry, and laundry room. The northeast wing included a bedroom, dressing room, and two bathrooms. The entire arrangement is symmetrical, and construction materials match those of the main block.

The Ewings also built a freestanding library, now referred to as the caretaker's cottage, and a barn. The caretaker's cottage, constructed in 1936, is located northwest of the house along the entrance drive from Long Point Road. It is a small, one-story frame building with a side gable roof, two chimneys, and a screened front porch. The barn was built in 1944 and is located west of the caretaker's cottage. It is a large, center-aisle, seven-bay frame structure with a cross-gabled roof and a cupola. Both structures follow the design of the main house. The corncrib, built around 1910, is located just to the south of the barn. It is a frame structure with vented side-walls and board-and-batten gable ends.

A cenotaph memorializing Colonel Charles Pinckney is located southeast of the main house. Erected between 1949 and 1968, the cenotaph is a 5½-foot-tall, 2½-foot-wide marble tablet with an incised inscription and the image of a funerary urn. The marker is nonhistoric and apparently replaced the original marker erected at Snee Farm in the 1780s by Charles Pinckney in memory of his father, who is buried in the churchyard of St. Philip's in Charleston.

SIGNIFICANCE

The main house at Snee Farm is significant at the state and local level under Criterion C as a representative example of a low country Coastal Cottage. South Carolina's gentry built Coastal



Figure 29, Barn



Figure 30, Corncrib



Figure 31, Caretaker's Cottage

Cottages on plantations throughout the low country in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Architectural features found at the main house at Snee Farm, such as the side-gabled roof, full-width front porch, Georgian plan, and neoclassical ornamentation, are characteristic of Coastal Cottages throughout the region.

The caretaker's cottage and barn, built during the Ewing period of ownership, and the corncrib possibly dating from the Hamlin ownership period, contribute to the significance of the site by providing an understanding of the twentieth-century uses of Snee Farm as an agricultural property and a vacation home.

INTEGRITY OF THE HISTORIC RESOURCES

The main house at Snee Farm retains most elements of integrity. Location, materials, and workmanship have not been altered since the house was completed circa 1828, and invoke feelings and associations appropriate to a nineteenth-century Coastal Cottage. The setting is partly rural with only remnants of agricultural landscape. A cluster of houses recently constructed south of the site is the most significant disruption of the historic scene. The design, which was altered with the addition of two rear wings, retains the distinctive qualities that define a low country Coastal Cottage. The additions are set back from the south facade, minimizing their visual impact on the front and sides of the house.

The outbuildings, including the caretaker's cottage, the barn, and the corncrib, all possess sufficient integrity of materials, design, setting, and location and are eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The integrity of the caretaker's cottage has been compromised by deterioration of its fabric due to overgrown vegetation and pest infestation. However, it still possesses its major character-defining features and is eligible for the National Register.



Figure 32, Cenotaph

Contributing Resources

Main House, circa 1828, rear additions, 1936-1941.

Caretaker's Cottage, 1936

Barn, 1944

Corncrib, circa 1910

Noncontributing Resources

Cenotaph, 1949-1968 (managed as a cultural resource)

Rest Rooms/Visitor Contact, 1994

Curatorial Storage, 1996

Notes

¹ William P. Baldwin, Jr., *Plantations of the Low Country* (Greensboro, NC: Legacy Publications, 1985), 33-39, 45-46; Roger G. Kennedy, *Architecture, Men, Women and Money in America, 1600-1860* (New York: Random House, 1985), 45-46, 55.

² Baldwin, 45-46.

³ *Historic Resources of the Lowcountry* (Yemassee, SC: Lowcountry Council of Governments, 1979), 63.

⁴ *Historic Resources of the Lowcountry*, 63, 95-97, 114; Baldwin, 45-46, 62-63, 99, 114.

⁵ *Historic Resources of the Lowcountry*, 96.

⁶ Samuel G. Stoney, *Plantations of the Lowcountry* (Charleston: Carolina Art Association, 1938), 80, 223; Baldwin, 113-14.

⁷ *Historic Resources of the Lowcountry*, 63, 95-97, 114.

⁸ Kennedy, 45-46; George C. Rogers, Jr., *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1980), 82.

⁹ Baldwin, Jr., 62-63.

¹⁰ Cotton became the predominant crop in South Carolina in the decades after the invention of the cotton gin in 1793.

¹¹ Buchanan, et. al., "Architectural Investigations at Snee Farm" (Friends of Snee Farm, 1991), 7. Style, method of construction, and other physical evidence support the circa 1828 date of construction. Additionally, Mathews purchased the estate for \$1,230 less than it cost the previous owner Francis G. Deliesseline, suggesting that Mathews rather than Deliesseline built the existing house.

¹² Historic American Building Survey, 9-10.

¹³ Plat Number 2354.

¹⁴ Plat Number 5564.

¹⁵ See Historic American Building Survey for complete building description and measured drawings.

¹⁶ The site which was originally entered from the south, is currently oriented to the north. The south elevation of the main house was designed as the main front and will herein be described as the front elevation of the house.